

Round of Folly

Premier Kosygin's affirmative reply to President Johnson's invitation to a discussion of the means of limiting the nuclear arms race is welcome indeed. It revives hopes that the United States and the Soviet Union may avoid a bootless expenditure of billions of dollars that would leave both of them as vulnerable to attack as they were in the beginning.

It was to be expected that the Soviet Premier would wish to have the discussion focus on both offensive and defensive nuclear missiles. This is logical and practical. No real distinction can be made. Each nation's offensive and defensive weapons together constitute its total military power. The sum of its nuclear strength embraces both its ability to intercept the enemy's offensive missiles and its capacity to penetrate the enemy's defensive missiles. As Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara so convincingly explained to Congress, what is in prospect is an enormous increase in both offensive and defensive weaponry that, in the end, will not profoundly alter the capability of either power to destroy the other.

For the moment, the arms race has been stabilized at a level of terror that involves a high degree of mutual restraint. The two super powers are sufficiently familiar with each other's potential to know that neither can strike the other with a degree of impunity that would encourage any sober authority to begin a nuclear war. There has been a pause at a level of deterrence each side understands. Over a relatively long period of time that this balance has persisted, there have been few alarms or excursions into wild conjecture and far-fetched fancy. Once the upward spiral resumes, each country will again be prey to the exaggerations of its intelligence apparatus, to the misjudgments of its statesmen and to the excessive fears of its military. The world will live in a climate of greater anxiety. And it will live in the dread that the exaggerated confidence or unwarranted fears of one side or another may precipitate some piece of irreparable folly.

The two super powers are at a threshold that they will cross only at grave peril. If they do there will be a period when each is driven forward by fear of what they do not know of the other, as well as by a fear of what they do know. After months or years of vast expenditure, unbearable uncertainty and public alarm, a new balance will be struck, if we are lucky. Each then will have a great deal less money, a great deal more apprehension and not a bit more security. This is a round of folly that rational statesmen ought to be able to avoid.